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**BILL NEMITZ**

## War forum is no day at the beach

**H**e is a self-described peace activist. He thinks the war in Iraq is a big mistake. But one thing set Dexter Kamilewicz of Orr's Island apart last weekend as he waited his turn to speak to U.S. Rep. Tom Allen.

While Kamilewicz settled into his seat in the Portland High School Auditorium for Allen's "town meeting" on the war that just keeps going, his 29-year-old son, Ben, a sergeant with the Vermont Army National Guard, was unpacking his duffel bag for a long deployment in central Iraq.

"I do not believe we're dissing the troops by opposing the war," Kamilewicz said Thursday, looking back on a dialogue with Allen that he and the 300-plus others who attended will not soon forget. "We wrap them up in the flag – and then we send them home in a flag. And that's just wrong."

Strong words – especially at a time of year when the peaceful sound of waves crashing on Maine's beaches drowns out the drumbeat of suicide bombings still coming out of Iraq. But Kamilewicz, for one, thinks it's time we all step away from life the way it should be long enough to contemplate life the way it is – not just here, but over there.

"We needed to have this discussion," Kamilewicz said. "Here we have a congressman saying, 'I'm going take a Sunday afternoon and sit down and listen to what people have to say (about the war).' And he's serious about it. Now that's real news."

It's also proof positive that Allen is willing to go where many of his colleagues in Congress don't dare – into those murky political waters where legitimate criticism of the Bush administration's handling of the war can quickly get you in trouble with the self-appointed patriotism police.

"I knew there would be anger and frustration," Allen said when asked this week what he expected, going into the town meeting. "But I also felt it would be a good thing to hold this forum and let people speak."

And speak they did. Many, including Kamilewicz, disagreed with Allen's position that the United States, for all its mistakes getting into and prosecuting the war, now has a "moral obligation" to stay in Iraq until a stable government emerges from the political chaos.

"By being there, we are creating more problems than we're solving," Kamilewicz argued, adding that the Pentagon's "lack of support" in both equipment and training for his son and the other troops is nothing short of disgraceful.

But what made this an "extremely powerful meeting" for Kamilewicz was not the depth of disagreement between Allen and some of his constituents. Rather, it was how respectfully most everyone listened to one another – particularly when Kamilewicz and relatives told what it's like to lie awake every night, fearing for their beloved soldier's safety.

Kamilewicz still wishes Allen would consider calling for an immediate and complete withdrawal from Iraq. Still, he commends the congressman for at least having "the courage, personally and politically," to hold a meeting in the first place.

As for the heavy turnout, Kamilewicz was not surprised. As Maine troops spend yet another summer in Iraq, he predicts, the crowds will only grow.

"Right now, violence is just begetting more violence," Kamilewicz said. "Somebody has to draw a line in the sand."

Even on a beach day.

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